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“The Future is Not Written?: The Role of WAC in Future-Proofing Higher Learning.”

Introduction:

In this paper, I’m going to consider the influences on education policy and tactics that shape our teaching praxis towards specialism or generalism in teaching writing. I particularly interested in looking at the issues of interdisciplinary focus, and how they stack up with the strengths of Writing Across the Curriculum programmes, drawing on a range of current research findings to present a case of “pragmatic optimism” for future needs. Being “pragmatically optimistic” suggests a willingness to evaluate and be prepared to adapt to potential changes in educational needs and uses that that education might be put to.

It is noted that there appears solid rationale for trends in Higher Education geared towards greater specialisation, including the implementation of Writing in the Disciplines programmes, where funding and suitable pedagogical support exists. It stands to reason that those subjects with dedicated writing training (and critical reading and research training, also), will tend to perform well *within their discipline*. However, there are also, perhaps, some flaws in rationale behind political and economic pressure (and some significant student interest) for aligning particular education pathways with outcome professions. Recent governmental signalling for this future emphasis is consistent with a pattern of development in funding and policy since the turn to Neo Liberalism in the 1980s, turning students into clients, products and future employees - but are these approaches limiting the education on offer?

I argue that a broader, more interconnected approach in education. In my mind, the principles of Writing Across the Curriculum can provide a necessary counter to these trends, helping to foster greater multidiscplnarity or interdisciplnarity, self-awareness and critical thinking in the student body, with the potential for greater student-centred and continued learning in preparation for what is sure to be a changed and changing future context.

Another Introduction: Imagine this...

Greater specialisation, and support such as Writing with the Disciplines, is often associated with advancing both a discipline's research quality, and also in the production of more competent graduates. However, this focus may not be a disinterested benefit to the discipline.

Writing in the nineteenth fifties, a biochemistry professor in the United States speculated on a strange, implausible future where economics had become the main staple of society. In this future, apparatus of the state still exists, but big corporations have shaped society to their own ends, effectively operating in political functions alongside their commercial interests, in a spreading neo-colonial division of territory and society. Their influence has even co-opted the Olympics as an event sponsored by business and interplanetary competition for the best workers. Likewise, economics has dictated the form of education: an almost universal vocationally-focussed education system that funnels students into a strange meritocratic hierarchy. Students' educational expectations are now almost exclusively governed by the job market.

We find this vision published in the short story "Profession" (1966), in which the biochemistry professor, science fiction author Isaac Asimov, posits and critiques this potential future. This is a version of an advanced capitalist system seeking highly specialised workers. As this is science fiction, the technology involved in "education" is an important feature: in his story, education is virtually instantaneous: subjects are first examined for occupational suitability, then imprinted with a "complete" set of skills and knowledge for their vocational role. Hence, the *meritocracy* of education is biologically-determined: quite an authoritarian, restrictive device, resulting in social class stratification. Likewise, because education is instantaneous and "complete" at the time of taping, it is soon obsolete in a changing technical environment, leading to further social inequities amongst those not able to access the latest tapes.

Asimov's protagonist, George Platen, gets a taste of things to come when he turns eight and learns to read in a moment of buzzing machinery (1966, p. 25). Yet things don't turn out so well at Education Day, when it appears that he is unsuited for the role of computer programmer that he has had the audacity to prepare himself for (an act of education called "useless" by the supervising physician [pp. 29-32]). In fact, it appears that George is unsuited for any of the profession tapes, and is instead sent to the "House for the Feeble Minded" where he is doomed to learn the slow way: via books. When George "escapes" to try to prove his worth to one of the big employers, the subtext of his rejection is revealed. George makes a case for a different approach to education, a teacher-student relationship that is more able to cope with problems of lag between technical innovations and the skill-implant tapes. George has realized that he is part of a two-tiered education system, though highly unbalanced. The vocational aspect is the majority model for his society; yet his society also retains a "higher education" model for a very small elite of innovative thinkers.

While Asimov's tale speculates on technology for such direct imprinting which is not here yet, and many would note obvious limitations on such a process for "learning" (some of which the author points out himself fairly directly as patently stupid); yet Asimov's concern for the unbalanced shape of future education is not as far-fetched as it might initially appear. His concerns seem to lie with an inflexible overspecialisation, and an allied overemphasis of education as purely a function for producing a stratified workforce, where this specialisation is "authorised" by the notion of meritocracy: the division is fair because it is based on the abilities and suitability of workers for their profession. Such societal selection has parallels with troubling pseudo-scientific rationalising such as phrenology or social eugenics, and ignores the fact that the labour demands of the present are likely to change, putting in doubt narrow parameters of direct transmittal training.

"Modern" Tertiary Divisions of Education:

Certainly, the two-tier education system has had a long history. Nietzsche, looking at his nineteenth century context, noted the troubling division as one between too much focus on culture, and none, and a likewise split in education modes for different functions in society. He was particularly concerned with a seemingly class-defined division between education systems, with a vocational form juxtaposed with education for the social elite. While contemporary theorists such as Bentham approached such problems with Utilitarian models, Nietzsche was very wary of structuring education in such "programmatically" ways, suspicious of society's construction of authority, and instead favouring more loose, pre-Socratic models, in terms of more indeterminate disciplinary subject definition and dynamic student-teacher relationships (Allen, 1998).

Paul Willis, studying working class educational expectations in 1970s Britain, though, notes complexities in the relationship between the system that is failing the students, and the students who are failing as an act of resistance to a system not aligned with their own class cultural agenda. Instead of the social divisions being simply imposed, Willis indicates that social class values are partly authorized or enabled from within to the template offered from without (1977). As Willis reports,

Bourdieu and Passeron have argued that the importance of institutionalised knowledge and qualification lies in social exclusion rather than in technical or humanistic advance. They legitimate and reproduce a class society.... [They] argue that it is the exclusive "cultural capital" – knowledge and skill in the symbolic manipulation of language and figures – of the dominant groups in society which ensures the success of their offspring and thus the reproduction of class position and privilege. This is because educational advancement is controlled through the "fair" meritocratic testing of precisely those skills which "cultural capital" provides. (p. 128)

Willis' "lads" recognise their exclusion in the codes of the classroom, and instead practice their own subcultural and class-derived tastes for anarchic humour and the privileging of work over higher learning.

Whether a vocational model, or a model of "higher learning" principles, though, the trend at both ends of the educational divide has been towards greater specialisation: niche positioning and legitimising of the "product" of the education, whether you are aimed for a specific technical job, or the high status and money of a profession. The shifts to neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, and especially the "user pays" ethos applied to education (among other former "service sectors"), had been important in underwriting these shifts from more general, "liberal" models.

Neoliberalism and Education in New Zealand...

The issue of who should pay for tertiary education intensifies the ideological focus on what that education is worth, and what place it should have in society. Even in the modern Western university model, where there is a surviving aim to foster higher thought, and provide a “conscience on society”, the shift from the 1980s to a “user-pays” system has changed the very nature of tertiary education, partially replacing the primacy of educational precepts with a “business model” of organisation and operation. The impacts it has on student expectations, outcomes, and the very ideology of courses delivered demonstrate some disturbing elements of education becoming commoditised, tempered with some gains such as greater student consultation and more intense monitoring of quality, and particular expectations rising while others are less emphasized.

With the “user pays” model, education has needed to adapt to business models, with degrees increasingly seen as commodities (Olssen, 2002); the profit motive, organisation and accountability stressed (Olssen, 2002; Crespo & Dridi, 2007); students becoming “clients” or “customers”, with the associated relationships shifting between “provider” and the student body (Maguad, 2007); and greater partnerships with private business, including conditional funding for research and staffing favouring certain practical or profitable disciplines (and potentially “commoditising” output) (Crespo & Dridi, 2007).

Some of the negative effects on students are obvious: with the need to pay enlarged fees, loans and greater debt result (Claridge, 2005), with a concomitant greater need to work while studying (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005; Claridge, 2005) having effects on less time to study, but perhaps more commitment to passing (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005). Because students are paying a significant portion of the costs, they have rising expectations of their education, including weighing up value for money, pressing for better teaching, facilities (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005; Maguad, 2007).

Also because of the need for competition model represented in the need for students as income, there are changes in institutional and pedagogical focus. Some notable shifts include a redirection towards “vocational” course focus (Olssen, 2002)

- pressure to attract students and keep their money (EFTS as well as fees) alongside educating them (Olssen, 2002; Crespo & Dridi, 2007; Maguad, 2007)
- shift towards consultative process (∴ popular courses survive – others seen as “non-essential”) (Maguad, 2007; Olssen, 2002; Claridge, 2005).

An convergence between higher expectations and skills has given rise to a more common call to improve student writing, but the association with the commodotised product of a degree for a profession

Conclusion:

While “user-pays” emphasis in tertiary education has resulted in some positive developments, including greater consultation and concern with what students want, many of the shifts towards a “business” mentality in operation and organisation tend to detract from traditional educational precepts, and display more concerns for economic turnover and end up producing citizens tied to debt.

My discipline:

How do these ideas fit with what I see happening at the boundaries of my own discipline: Literary Studies?

Ideas about the place of literature (in society and in the university) are diverse in the average English department (although ours is less schismatic now than historically or in comparison to others I've seen). Particularly, there seems to be a divide between those who favour maintaining the "separatedness" of the discipline and teaching methods that are designed to distinguish Literary Criticism as an "elect" craft, and those whose tendency is to value or try to effect connectedness with a wider community of students, colleagues and surrounding society.

In the judgement of Stanley Fish, "the literary critic as I imagine him is anything but an organic intellectual in the Gramsci sense: instead he is a specialist, defined and limited by the traditions of his [sic] craft, and it is a condition of his [sic] labours... that he [sic] remain distanced from any effort to work changes in the structure of society." (1995, p. 1) While Fish contends that rhetoricians, writers and, especially, poets once had political clout and faced the dangers associated with this, he believes literary scholars and teachers no longer have a direct role in influencing public opinion (pp. 34–35), unlike, for example, scientists and law professors (p. 52).

Fish, both a traditional literary scholar and a law professor, suggests that the boundaries of such disciplines limit the activities of teaching *within* them. *Because* Literary Studies is an academic discipline, Fish claims that it is both isolated and insulated from the "larger arenas" of the real world (p. 43), and his own practice seems to act towards the goal of making this "concrete". His view of the role of teacher within this discipline is, then, one of "professional correctness", basically following in the footsteps of previous practice, acknowledging its "constitutive rules" and viewing learning as a process of transferring knowledge and recreating / reproducing scholars out of students (pp. 44–45): an aim of replacing the "old guard" with a *new* "old guard". In his practice, lectures and smaller seminar deliveries appear to be substantially modelled on posing "literary questions" in a pre-established mode (eg: close-reading exercises of Milton, detailed interpretation or detection of stylistic trends). Students, it seems, might be encouraged to come up with their own readings of texts taught, but Fish seems to have pretty firm ideas about the limits to interpretation: some readings are "legitimate" while others are dismissed.

Fish's agenda seems shaped by a desire to shore-up particular "Disciplinary" approaches to reading texts (cf. Toohey, 1999, p. 49), based on so-called New Criticism (matching a highly "textual" focus with canonical awe about the "value" of specially chosen texts). Perhaps this is particularly shaped by his own sub-specialism of Milton studies, where there is a long-established tradition of readings based on poetic rhetoric, religious iconography and viewing the contemporary historical context selectively. His arguments also seem to favour an expectation of "reproducing" students and to introduce them to the "arcane" art of reading literature that will make them part of an elite or "elect" group (p. 50). This kind of project is also related to a "cognitive" approach, encouraging students to "use and strengthen their intellectual faculties" (Toohey, 1999, p. 55), though with a tendency to steer the cognition to "formalist" tasks.

Another understanding of his argument, though, is as much a “rear-guard” as an “old-guard” action, defending his ideals of the discipline and teaching ideologies associated with this model from those teachers of literature who seek to change the “place” of literature in society and the university, and who chose different approaches to teaching and learning that might be appropriate to their different purposes. In particular, he is concerned that with approaches to the subject and teaching that coalesce around “socially critical” (Toohey, 1999, p. 63) modes of analysis and teaching. In criticising figures such as Terry Eagleton, John Frow, Tony Bennett and Robert Scholes, Fish identifies a shift towards interdisciplinarity and “cultural studies”: a shift he sees as potentially damaging (to his idea of disciplined scholarship).

However, Scholes’ (2004) model of “scholarship” is one that is not just *broad*: it is also deep. Scholarship, as Scholes defines it, is different to the aims of “product”-driven research in other faculties (he somewhat sweepingly suggests this idea of “research... always leads to products and processes that have academic or military applications,” [p. 120]: but he *is* speaking from an American context). Instead, he makes a claim that scholarship is learning for teaching, and that teaching in Literary Studies that establishes interdisciplinary connections requires thorough learning in those domains and, perhaps, “asking for assistance from our friends in other disciplines, if we need it.” (p. 127) Putting this claim into practice, Scholes’ short essay is thoroughly supported by a range of texts from different disciplines, congealing around discussion of what constitutes the “University” and research that interrogates the appropriateness of teaching methodologies (p. 127). In this respect, Scholes’ approach to the discipline, and teaching is also careful to define differences, while still able to trade on these to extend a discipline’s relevance.

Rather than being “undisciplined”, scholarship-pedagogy aligned to interdisciplinarity actually has a long tradition, also, within Literary Studies. Appiah (2005), writing more generally on the “Humanities”, points out, disingenuously, that

Locke belongs, of course, in the history of psychology; Darwin belongs, equally decisively, in the history of English literature; Freud belongs in the history of neuroscience; Goethe in the history of biology. All of them belong, as well, in other disciplinary histories. (p. 39)

While our approaches to teaching these figures will be different dependent on our department alignment, the fact that these figures can and are taught across disciplinary boundaries is viewed as positive. Appiah points out that the specialisation in the nineteenth-century and continuing “intellectual division of labor” (p. 40), with intensively categorised specialisations but also major, or macro, divisions of fields, potentially produces both great rewards but problems of isolation and incoherence; yet, he insists that Humanities courses have long worked through a process of interchange and interrelation between subdisciplines, just as scientists seek interdisciplinarity. To illustrate this, take the example of one figure mentioned just above: Darwin. Darwin’s legacy one of multiple “ownership”: with “Social Darwinism” or adaptations of “survival of the fittest” being models applied to politics and economics. However, ironically, as Stephan Jay Gould points out, this interdisciplinary borrowing has not been one way: Gould notes the heavy influence of other disciplines on Darwin’s own theories, suggesting the ideas of Adam Smith, for example, were usefully borrowed as a model for evolutionary theory. This sense of cross-influential context is also important in Humanities subjects; these, Appiah argues, “are intrinsically connected with teaching: to make these objects intelligible, we must teach their contexts, their systems of significance, the rules and the rule breaking that made them.” (p. 44)

In terms of teaching Literary Studies in the modern university, there is scope for the more traditional approach to subjects and teaching styles (and a kind of “scholar-apprentice” relationship [cf. Fish, 1995, p. 32, “immanent intelligibility”; and Scholes, 2004, Linkon, 2005, p. 270, on teaching “craft”]),

but also for, equally traditional, associations across disciplines and with social concerns as they relate to texts and discourse. Foci that combine useful “critical cultural reading” skills of textual and contextual analysis in literature courses make for more openness for prospective students. There is also, in these foci the potential to engage with “cognitive”, “expressivist”, and “social-cultural” modes of reading, that engage with students’ own experience (as a resource or a challenge) in ways that reinforce the “learning” (Linkon, 2005, p. 249).

While the object or product focus of Literary Studies / Criticism has (and still is, to an extent) concentrated in collected knowledge about a set of texts (canonical), genre or historical / cultural conditions reflected in texts, and the production of writerly ability (immediately in essay and exams, and later in writing in any number of occupations), less traditional assessment modes, like portfolios and reader forums (Linkon, 2005; Clark, 2005), present more student-driven outcomes with less predictable (but potentially rewarding) results.

Writing Across the Curriculum?

Operating as an English teacher in a tertiary institution, I am very much concerned with preserving many of the useful specifics of Literary Studies, yet I would find this hard to separate from making the necessary connections with critical methods and contexts that the study of English intersects with. Effectively, a Writing within the Curriculum focus in English often looks increasingly like a Writing across the Disciplines focus.

My disciplinary tools still reside partly in literary criticism and rhetorical knowledge that are convergent with New Criticism, and recognition of literary traditions, to more interdisciplinary tools. This fits my undergraduate population, who may or may not be majoring in English, but who all take other disciplines. Teaching core reading, analysis, and research skills, ideas about argument, structure and control of expression should, to my mind transfer quite readily to other disciplines, and in my level 100 course on academic writing, I leave the final research assignment’s subject open to negotiation to encourage students’ research interests, and to give them practice in adapting principles covered to different contexts, if they wish. The majority do choose to. Analysing the past 5 intakes of the course, approximately 80% of the students choose a focus that is either literary with a strong interdisciplinary approach, or choose another disciplinary focus (Bedggood, 2010). This is usually the most successful of the assignments of the course: partly this reflects that it is at the end of the course, and allows the previous formative assignments and feedback to influence their practice. It also reflects their interests, though, is a good measure of their adaptations between disciplines. This last point is supported anecdotally, with high numbers of graduates from the course reporting that, despite the need (but also probably because of them), they have managed to produce better essays in their other subjects more consistently.

Further research may be warranted to support this, but it seems that an interdisciplinary focus, and student-centred tasks help to achieve this important facet of adaptation and self-reflection in student success.

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